



## Establishing Cooperation and Links Between Developed and Developing Countries in the Field of Children's Literature

— HELENE SCHAR\*

I have been asked to talk about ESTABLISHING COOPERATION AND LINKS BETWEEN DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES IN THE FIELD OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE.

Before I enter into this subject, it seems significant to me to have a retrospective view of the historical evolution of European children's literature.

Thanks to the typographic-art, which had been invented by Gutenberg in the 15th century, books have been spread out lar-

gely in the middle class. It was first of all the Bible, which, translated into the secular language, was read most frequently. But also for children, especially for boys, there were the so-called ABC-plates which contained important ideas of the Christian faith, and also preliminary instructions for reading and writing.

Around 1740, during the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, the middle class increased more and more. The age of Enlightenment brought new theories about edu-

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cation. Childhood was considered a so-called anteroom of the real human being, which needed special treatment. During this period, children's literature started to have an existence of its own. It was literature, dedicated first of all to the middle class children. Its task was clear: it had to be edifying and instructing; so it should have a pedagogical aim and should help to make the child into an independent group-up person.

Meanwhile, the entertaining book gradually appeared. With that, the pedagogical claim moved into the background.

With the growth of the elementary school and the introduction of compulsory education the children's book also entered non-middle-class circles.

Nevertheless, even today, the social class determines whether children possess many books or not, and whether their approach to books is easy or not.

School — and commune-libraries, which already had their origin in the Age of Enlightenment, help today to reduce the inhibition to use books. However, the "reading-landscape" in Europe—I know it from Switzerland and Germany, and I imagine that it is quite representative also for other European countries—has also a dark side. Many children reach rarely, or never spontaneously and outside of school, to books, and the school itself takes very little pains to promote children's reading pleasure. The fact that in Switzerland, there are actually 20,000 to 30,000 adults who have difficulties with reading and writing a text or even with understanding it, is very serious. Functional illiteracy increases yearly, and this in a so-called developed country, where every normal gifted person has absorbed an obligatory school time of about 7 to 8 years.

Nevertheless, children's literature has its place today in the European landscape of literature as a literature of its own and

can maintain it. Moreover, it has become an economic venture, a business with an enormous turnover. International book fairs are standing examples, especially the annual Book fair for Children and Youth in Bologna.

But the business with the childbook is a business of the adults and only too often the children, the real addressees, are completely excluded. On the one hand, the big concurrence forces the publishing houses to bring out books that are even more artistic, more sophisticated and qualitatively better and on the other hand, they are forced into economic pressures which become more and more doubtful. So picture-books which must be printed, because of high-costs, in co-production with many other European, North American or Japanese publishing houses, lose their cultural peculiarity. That means for example, that a Japanese artist must paint uniform faces because typical Japanese characters could make sales difficult in Europe. All cultural specialities are not desired in such co-produced books except when it is the aim to specially show these cultures. This makes a search for new producers even more difficult.

It is remarkable how shortlived such publications are. A book which is three years old is terribly old-fashioned and only few works can survive a longer period of time. A work disappears from the market, if the precalculated sales figures are not arrived at, even if its quality is exceptional.

The development of the children's book is quite different in nearly all countries of the Third World. It seems easier to me in this case to say "Third World" than "developing countries." "The Third World" means to me economic disadvantages and exploitation together, both responsible in a certain sense for the difficulties in the landscape of children's literature in these



countries. Everywhere in the Third World, a deeply rooted tradition of narrating determines the literary quality of the countries. Over thousands of years, this literature was told from one generation to the other. This tradition still exists today, although it is gradually vanishing, because of modern ways of living, the mass media and the influences of Western industrialized countries. This narrating tradition does not address itself exclusively to the child. Narrating is for everybody who who wants to listen. This seems to be a quite a different starting point compared to Europe.

The book, that is the written narration, did not originate from the people's history. It was brought to them and partially forced upon them by the colonizing powers. Today, of course, it is indispensable for all countries to have the written language. Countries of the Third World have learnt that reading and writing are important means to help them hold their ground against the predominance of the industrialized Western world. Therefore, it needs children's literature. For children's literature to survive and to be competitive, it cannot develop itself through the centuries, but it should start at once there, where the European children's literature is today. But this is quite difficult because of cultural and material reasons. And is it desirable that the countries of the Third World should adapt themselves once more, to strive for the same standard which in Europe is already being questioned—is there a need for thousands of new publications yearly which shortly might fall into oblivion?

Nevertheless, it must be possible to plan a co-production programme with the rich countries. The independent production of each country could thus be promoted in a significant way.

Until today, there are only a few books which have appeared with such a co-produc-

tion. What has been done in adult literature during a few years is very difficult for the child book. What holds off European-western-publishers from bringing out children's books from Third World countries?

Now I shall try to reproduce the reason pointed out during talks with German and Swiss publishers :

#### — *Accessibility*

How, when and where has the publisher the possibility to get to Indian books? Some years ago, in Frankfurt at the book fair "India" was the main subject. I can tell you from my own experience how difficult it was to find good and suitable books.

The most frequent books that have a minimal chance to be translated, are myths, fables or fairy-tales. We know that in India these constitute a large cultural richness, but not each editor has the intention to publish fairy-tales. Moreover, not all myths, legends and fairy-tales of another culture can be easily understood by children.

Supposing a publisher would like to bring out every-day-stories with boys and girls from today, it becomes much more difficult. The choice that normally reaches Europe, is very small and consists in most cases of books already translated from English.

#### — *Language*

Many foreign languages—and how many different languages exist in India itself already!—have nearly no chance, because of translation difficulties for us. First of all, we should find evaluators who could form an opinion about a text. But even if there exist already such an expertise, many editors would not have the courage to get over the obstacles, which make such a book very expensive. There are enough offers of texts in our own country as well, and the writing desks of the publishers normally are flooded with manuscripts.

#### — *The So-called Literacy Level*

A large number of books in India have school-book character. I think a country



where a great portion of the population has to become literate first is deeply concerned with the effort of promoting the reading habit. Financial resources are not sufficient to establish also a self-reliant children's literature beyond school. So, it seems easier to acquire or get licences for books out of the excessive Western supply.

When I was at the IBBY-Congress in Cipros in 1984, I was quite shocked to hear from Gloria Dillsworta, Librarian from Sierra Leone, that most of their young library-borrowers read Enid Blyton, which is through and through European literature, even of doubtful value, because it shows all the cliches and traditional role behaviour that we prefer to abandon today. Should African—say the Asian, Latin American children orient themselves on such doubtful European idols?

— *The claim of an Intact Culture*

Many Europeans think in the Third World there still would exist completely intact cultures without any modern influences of industrialized life. Since their own culture is decomposing more and more, they construct such wishful dreams; when they cannot find this completeness in books from other cultures. On the contrary, people do things like we do or because of an actual changeover, things happen that they don't expect. Europeans have problems. For example: A publisher has brought out a book painted by an Eskimo. On one plate, he represents the Christmas carol, only Jesus Christ's birth is settled down in the high north and the shepherds are Eskimos with their sleighdogs, the cave or crib is an igloo. A very impressionable adaptation. Many Europeans now have problems with that plate, because they would like to see Eskimos with the faith of their own, original culture and with their own Gods. In the meantime, those same Europeans completely forget that their ancestors over centuries brought the Christian faith there,

and that way, made it a part of their culture.

We often reject values and customs which do not correspond to our ideas, and therefore, appear strange to us. But I know from my own experience that children react more openly and seem much more curious to see such strange and unknown things than adults. However, just these adults decide what could frighten a child, they judge whether a book can be accepted or not. Unfortunately, we cannot forget that they also buy the books!

— *Authenticity*

People are always looking for authentic books. But what is really authentic? Where does authenticity start?

Many publishers who lay claim to publish authentic books are not clear about what authenticity means. Maybe, it begins where we start to have difficulties with understanding, where the text begins to be strange for us. By selecting texts for the Children's Book Fund, we often notice that we prefer contents identified later on as texts from European authors! The same happens frequently with illustrations. The colonial heritage has left its different traces on the European people as well. We feel embarrassed, try not to be presumptuous or racist, we always feel guilty in face of exploitation, the injustice and arrogance of Western countries, a strange initial situation that influences our opinion about literature.

Today, in European children's literature, there are several different ways of viewing our own way of living. Women in so-called progressive Europe are emancipated and independent and at least equally entitled to the same rights as man. We all know very well that it will take us a long time to reach equality. Nevertheless, we have progressed quite a bit compared to the situation twenty or thirty years ago. Critical children's literature should stimulate the girl in this new



attitude and should not lead her back to the traditional way of thinking about male and female roles. In countries outside of Europe and North America, women have a completely different position for pure cultural reasons and their struggle is another one. You can easily perceive this in literature. A European child or a grown-up has to face these differences.

Now comes the moment for talking about the THIRD WORLD CHILDREN'S BOOK FUND and the newly started series BAOBAB, I think. All difficulties mentioned above and the persuasion that only people from the concerned countries are really able to describe their life, their thinking, their feeling, to tell about their culture have shown us that it is very important to start their own series of children's books with literary testimonies from the Third World. Because we would like our children and young people to get an image as genuine as possible from people outside Europe. They should learn about other ways of life and see that theirs is not the only way. Through this idea we hope to reduce prejudice and discrimination, perhaps to contribute to a more humane world.

Until now, BAOBAB has published four books, two from Latin America, one from Nigeria, one from South Korea. Every year, at least two or three new titles should be added. The most important problem for us is to procure the books which are suitable for the series. To the difficulties already mentioned comes the fact that the Asiatic part has been until now the less accessible one. Especially India, a country that has, maybe, the largest children's literature in comparison with other countries outside of Europe, can look back to a longer historical evolution of it. Most of the few books that reached us until now were fairytales and myths, quite incomprehensible for our young children without the necessary cul-

tural background. We need everyday stories with children and young people, showing their daily life, their sorrow, their joys and their actual problems. But many books which could correspond with our ideas have come out in the seventies or earlier. They seem to us out-of-date and we think too that life has changed a lot in India in the last ten, twenty years. But we are also convinced that we did not get the real offer of children's literature from India, and I am very glad to have the possibility to talk here to you all and to beg you for helping us to make available as much material as possible.

Again I come to the problem of the different languages. How could we solve it? Would it not be a very useful task for the ASSOCIATION OF WRITERS AND ILLUSTRATORS FOR CHILDREN to make a selection of an extensive choice of good books from all language parts of India, maybe even with an English short-version for eventual licences, maybe with short translated summaries text? It could be of real help for all interested European publishers. During this Seminar, I would like to discuss possibilities of distribution of Indian children's books.

In Germany, there exists the so-called "Other Club for Literature." It also has a branch of children's literature and makes efforts to promote all kinds of literature from Africa, Asia and Latin America. We are working very closely together and plan to organise a meeting with authors and publishers from the above-mentioned continents and from Europe. Maybe, we would manage it at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.

The Third World Children's Book Fund has different ways of promoting the children's book production in Asia, Africa or Latin America. The Fund supports authors in the Third World by bestowing a contri-

*Continued on page 69*



*Continued from page 60*

bution upon them, the value of which is assessed for each project. Last year, we helped to publish a bibliography of African children's books already published, a very helpful work for the propagation of African children's literature.

A further way is to subsidise production. Such a subsidy may be either awarded to an author or to a publishing house for projected publications.

All corresponding applications have to

be made at the Fund. Nevertheless, our financial resources are limited in a certain sense and our BAOBAB project is quite expensive. But interesting projects can be considered.

I hope very much that this Seminar forms a good start for a significant and fruitful exchange of thoughts between India and Europe in the field of children's literature and I hope that India gets a permanent place alongside the European and the world literature for children.